

The Puget Sound Management Plan ~Update 2000~

The Habitat/Wetlands Programs



The Puget Sound Water Quality Action Team is revising the *Puget Sound Water Quality Management Plan*, the state's comprehensive strategy for protecting and enhancing Puget Sound and its natural resources. As part of this year's revision, we're rewriting the plan's Wetlands Protection and Fish and Wildlife Habitat Protection programs.

Why Are the Habitat and Wetlands Programs So Important?

The Puget Sound basin contains a mosaic of valuable fish and wildlife habitats. Upland forests and prairies absorb and deliver water to wetlands, streams and rivers, ultimately supplying fresh water, sediments and nutrients to Puget Sound. Natural erosion of bluffs maintains the beaches, coastal barriers and salt marshes that make up Puget Sound's shoreline habitats. Below the waves a world of sandflats, mudflats, eelgrass meadows, kelp beds and rocky reefs provide food and shelter to a myriad of creatures. Each of these habitats contributes enormously to the Sound's spectacular natural productivity, and makes the Sound an important resource for those of us who live in the Puget Sound basin.

The Current Habitat and Wetlands Programs

The current management plan helps us to manage the Sound's valuable wetlands and other habitats in a sustainable way. It calls on federal, state, tribal and local government agencies to protect wetlands and habitats by:

- Engaging in preservation, restoration and other non-regulatory stewardship.
- Enhancing land-use plans and development regulations.
- Coordinating the collection and distribution of inventories and other data.
- Educating the public about wetlands and other fish and wildlife habitats.
- Removing barriers to fish and wildlife use of wetlands and other important habitats.



With the help of state and federal funding, we've been able to acquire and restore important wetlands and other fish and wildlife habitats. Agencies have coordinated habitat inventories and identified habitat barriers using Geographic Information System (GIS) technologies. The Action Team and other agencies have stepped up their role as educators through technical assistance and presentations.

But challenges remain:

- Most Puget Sound cities and counties have not updated their shoreline master programs to address the continuing loss and alteration of nearshore habitat.
- There is no Sound-wide tracking system for evaluating the loss of wetlands and other important habitats resulting from permitted development.
- Funding for inventories and education continues to be a low priority.
- Fish populations are on the decline. Puget Sound Chinook, Hood Canal chum salmon and bull trout species are already listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act, and several other marine fish are proposed for listing.
- Some efforts at mitigation and restoration of the Sound's habitats have failed because we don't fully understand the complexity of wetlands and other habitats.
- Rapid population growth is placing increasing stress on the habitat resources of the basin.



Updating the Habitat and Wetlands Programs

The Action Team will develop draft programs and circulate them for public review during the summer of 2000. But first, we are meeting with individuals and groups who have a stake in habitat and wetlands issues—the agricultural community, builders, developers, environmental advocates, local governments and tribal governments—to discuss ideas for the update.

We'd like to explore:

- Incorporating watershed, salmon recovery and land-use planning into the management plan.
- Establishing scientific benchmarks for the recovery of wetlands and habitat.
- Defining government programs that are confusing or seem to overlap.
- Protecting remnants of critical habitat areas that are at risk of loss or degradation.

- Incorporating new research and evaluation techniques into the management plan, such as wetland functional assessment, citizens shoreline inventory and basinwide modeling programs.
- Addressing the cumulative loss and alteration of habitat from shoreline structures designed to prevent erosion and landslides.
- Developing information about wetland and nearshore habitat loss and making such information more readily available to decision-makers.

The following programs are also being revised or added during the update process: Stormwater and Combined Sewer Overflows, Aquatic Nuisance Species, and Transboundary Initiatives.

For more information, check out the complete text of the Puget Sound plan, additional fact sheets about the update process, and information about the Action Team at www.psat.wa.gov or call the Action Team at (360) 725-5444 or 1 (800) 54-SOUND. If you need these materials in an alternative format, call our TDD number 1-800-833-6388.

